



Half-tone plate engraved by J. H. Grimley

THE ROSE HAD FALLEN FROM THE BRIDE'S CLUSTER

## After the Wedding

BY ELMORE ELLIOTT PEAKE



THE white-haired couple stood at the limestone horse-block and strained their dim eyes down the elm-arched village street in the direction of a rapidly vanishing carriage. As the vehicle turned a distant corner, a girl within leaned forward and eagerly waved a bit of white. The man at the horse-block remained motionless, for seventy is not twenty; but the woman returned the farewell with a faltering flutter of her own damp handkerchief, and, as the carriage disappeared, bit her trembling lips. Then the aged couple returned to the yard, carefully closed the gate behind them, passed slowly down an aster-bordered walk, paused uncertainly on the old-fashioned piazza with the phoebe's nest in one corner, and entered the house.

In the parlor the subtle odor of well-groomed humanity still hung in the air, calling to mind satiny skins, lace handkerchiefs, and perfumed coils of hair. The floral decorations were already beginning to fade; bruised petals littered the floor, and among these lay a single white rose. It had fallen from the bride's cluster, and chanced to mark the very spot where she had publicly resigned her maidenhood, leaving father and mother to cleave to the man of her choice.

Four other sisters before her had done the same thing, in the same room, on almost the same spot. But she was the last of the brood of tender fledglings; the nest was now empty; and Mrs. Madison suddenly sank upon a sofa and softly began to cry. Old Ferdinand said nothing for the moment. Finally, though, he sat down beside her.

"Well, now, mother, I don't know as I'd cry," he ventured, cheerfully.

"You don't know what you would do,

Ferdinand, if you were her mother, and she your last baby," sobbed the other.

"You wouldn't have wanted her to turn out an old maid, would you?"

No answer.

"And you ought to be glad she's got such a steady young fellow as Frank for a husband." He pulled his short chin whiskers in affectation of a philosophical assurance which he was far from feeling.

Still no answer.

"She was as cool as a cucumber," he observed next, taking another tack. "I don't know as I ever seen a cooler bride. She was cooler than Frank. I saw his hand tremble when he put the ring on her finger."

"Maybe she wasn't as cool as she looked," said his wife, with the least resentment in her tear-mellowed voice. "Everybody said *I* was cool, but I know I thought my heart would burst. A woman doesn't always show what she feels."

"I thought you did, my dear, that day, when you promised to love me unto death," said he, smiling with reminiscent tenderness and taking her hand.

She shook her head, almost girlishly. "No, Ferdinand," said she, with sweet firmness, "I don't think you knew then how much I loved you, and I don't believe you have ever known since. I don't blame *you*. It isn't given to men to know, I am coming to believe. I don't know why, though I suppose God does."

"Frank is a good boy. He loves Anna. He'll provide for her well, and that is a great comfort. I have no fears that he'll ever bruise her heart—at least no more than it's woman's lot to be bruised, even by the best of men. But, O my husband!" she exclaimed, with a little wail that wrung the old man's heart, "he does not know, he cannot know, the depth of that child's love. He's the breath of her nostrils. She has made a god of him, and kneels in worship a hundred times a day. How often have I sat and watched the play of sunshine and shadow over her dear face as she read his letter! I knew almost as well as she what was in it, or whether it was a page longer or a page shorter than usual. And whenever he was with her she'd flutter around him like a bird, longing to absorb him in her great heart, yet held off by timidity, and compelled by convention

and womanly modesty to await his pleasure. Do you mean to tell me," she asked, almost sternly, "that Frank or any other man is worthy of such adoration as that?"

"No. But if God orders it, it must be just, and for the best."

"Oh, I know it's for the best; and it is not unjust, because such love is its own reward. It is vastly more precious to her than it is to him. Yet the day will come," she added, with twitching nostrils and fresh tears, "when she will know her god to be made of clay."

Ferdinand reserved comment. Perhaps the implication that *he* had turned out clay was a little too strong for judicial impartiality on his part.

She removed the last external trace of tears, and then went on:

"Last night she slipped into our room and woke me up. I saw that she was very nervous, so I went back to bed with her and lay there nearly an hour. She had not slept at all, and had got it into her head, from some careless word of Frank's, that perhaps he did not love her with that absorption and single-heartedness necessary to a perfectly happy and holy union. I needn't tell you what she said—she meant it for me alone; but I would have given this roof over our heads, Ferdinand, I believe, if Frank could have heard and seen her. I don't think the memory of it would have left him this side of the grave." (The tiny handkerchief's work was all undone now, and the tears were flowing freely again.) "It would have made him a better and a nobler man."

Time was when Ferdinand Madison, as modest a man as the average, perhaps, regarded himself as the head of his house and his wife as a helpmate. His ambition was then one of the significant facts of the universe (as he saw it), to which most other things might be proud to minister. But in spite of Biblical authority and his wife's enthusiastic agreement, fifty years had somewhat altered these views. Babies had arrived at his house, quietly, one by one, without a hint of revolution. A few turns of the wheel of time, and the babes were blooming girls. Then he awoke to the realization that the excuse for his existence was not ambition, but family.



*Edmund*

Thus it came about that the master became the servant, and he who was once head became but helpmate. At least, so he felt when he saw how little he could do for his daughters, aside from supplying their material wants, that Lucy could not do better. And as they sat together now, and she sadly murmured, "My hands are empty!" and spread the slender white members, palms up, on her black skirt, in mute, unconscious eloquence, he was amazed to recall that he once thought those small but capable hands made to minister to him and his lofty dreams. How much grander had been their work!

The house was very still that night. No booming of the piano; no racing of light feet up and down stairs—while mother held her breath until they safely reached the bottom; no animated swish of skirts through the sitting-room; no low crooning from Anna's room as she dressed, or combed her hair, or stitched away at some filmy bridal vesture; no clear, strong call from the hammock on the porch to some passing girl friend.

However, Amy Carroll, Anna's bosom companion, dropped in about eight o'clock on her way to the post-office for the late mail. Never was visitor more welcome, for she seemed to retain something of the essence of the departed one in a way that the inanimate things around the house could not retain it. Mrs. Madison, though not demonstrative, greeted the girl with a kiss; and the two clung to each other for an instant in one of those rigid, subtle, breathless embraces known only to women who feel a common sorrow.

"Who will take her place in our hearts, Amy?" asked the older woman, with a smile, bravely cheerful, but infinitely pathetic.

"Who will take *our* place in *her* heart?" returned Amy. "*He'll* have to expand some to do it, I'm thinking." And she

"I WATCHED HER DEAR FACE AS SHE READ HIS LETTER."

laughed to hide the mist in her eyes. "They are in Cincinnati by now—have been for two hours, if their train was on time. I wonder if they will go to the theatre to-night. They expected to, if they weren't too tired."

"I think Anna will feel like remaining quiet. She did not rest at all well last night."

"Amy," spoke up old Ferdinand, "sit down at the piano and play that favorite Nordica waltz of Annie's for us."

Amy, with a finer instinct than the old man's, glanced doubtfully at Mrs. Madison.

"Not to-night, Ferdinand, please," said she. "I—I don't believe I could stand it to-night."

Ferdinand walked down town with Amy, at Mrs. Madison's suggestion.

Left alone, Mrs. Madison drew her rocker close to the front door, where she would be nearer the thin stream of after-supper village life. It was a little damp for her outside, even with the protection of the porch. The night before, at this hour, Anna was lying in the hammock, gently swinging herself with one toe anchored to the floor. Frank had sat close at hand. Nearly every night, the whole summer long, when Frank was not close at hand, the girl had thus lain and swung herself for hours, thinking, thinking, thinking. The creaking hammock-hook, rusty and rheumatic from rain, had told Mrs. Madison, knitting just inside, all about it. Soft or loud—fast or slow—high or low—the old lady had learned all the hook's moods. Her chair had learned them too, and regulated its motion accordingly.

As she sat dreaming with wide-open eyes, the stillness was suddenly broken by this familiar creaking. Mrs. Madison ceased rocking, cocked her head to one side like a startled bird, and listened for the noise again, with an increased pulse. There was no wind, and she was quite certain that the hammock was not up. But—*zeek!* *zeek!* *ze-ek!* *z-e-e-e-k!* Her heart gave one great throb and then stood still. Superstition, that lighter or heavier sleeper in the breasts of us all, suddenly lifted its terrifying head. Amy's words about the bridal couple's train being on time had been running, curiously enough, in Mrs. Madison's head

ever since. Perhaps this was a warning! Perhaps—oh, dreadful thought!—there had been a wreck, and Anna's spirit—

The mysterious creaking came again. With trembling knees and palpitating heart, the frightened old lady forced herself to the door. For an instant she stood there with closed eyes, dreading she knew not what. Then she peered into the darkness. The hammock was not up; she could make out the idle ropes hanging from the hooks. But at the lower end of one of the ropes Anna's kitten crouched. Its little white paws were playfully spread, and as Mrs. Madison looked they tapped the funny snake-like plaything first on one side and then on the other, making it sway to and fro and squeak like a mouse.

She said nothing of her adventure to Ferdinand, but she knelt in prayer at her bedside longer than usual that night, asking God to forgive her weakness, and to enable her to bear this cross as she had borne others, forgetting not the duty of cheerfulness to her neighbors and her husband. Yet in spite of this and other supplications for strength, the endless, aimless days that followed seemed to strip her very bones of their marrow. She caught herself in tears many times a day. Moreover, there seemed nothing to do now. The house once set to rights in the morning, stayed so. There was no one to litter it up. The kitten prowled about, mewling disconsolately; and even the canary seemed to have lost his voice since the piano was stilled.

Old Ferdinand noted the change in her with a heavy heart. She seemed more girlish, more appealingly helpless, than she had for many a year.

"Now, mother," said he, at dinner one day, "you need to get out, and so do I. You go to the missionary meeting this afternoon, and I'll drive out to the farm. Is that a bargain?"

"Ferdinand, I *can't* go to that meeting," she protested, despairingly. "They'll all want to know about Anna, and—and—" A convulsive movement of her drawn throat finished the sentence.

"Can't!" repeated Ferdinand, sternly—as sternly as he ever spoke to her. "You never used to use that word."

She heard him through with a white, stricken face and downcast eyes, her thin

fingers nervously moulding a crumb of bread. He noted that she had laid her napkin on the table, although she had scarcely touched the food on her plate, and his heart smote him. She had a habit of sitting primly upright at table, without touching the back of her chair; and to-day this dainty, birdlike attitude, assisted by her black, close-fitting waist, brought out touchingly her little narrow shoulders, thin arms, and shrunken breast. Again his heart smote him, and only a sense of duty kept him from retracting his words.

"Ferdinand, I deserve your reproof," said she, with labored firmness. "I have been weak—sinfully so. Our girls were spared to grow to womanhood, when others were taken away. They are happily married, and how thankful we should be for that! And for me to grieve over Anna as though—as though she were dead, is a wicked thing, I know. Forgive me, husband, as I have asked God to forgive me, and I will try to do better. But if I could only tell you how I feel— It was only yesterday, it seems, that she came and leaned against my knees and asked me, with great, round eyes, how the storks could carry little babies in their bills without making them cry. I can't realize that since that day she has become a woman, a wife, a mother in possibility. She's so young and so innocent—" The trembling lips shut off the rest. "But I'll be good now," she concluded, smiling sweetly, with a spiritual light shining through the mist in her eyes. "And I'll go to the missionary meeting. But I won't promise to stay it out."

Old gray Billy jogged pleasantly along the white warm turnpike. The barking of distant dogs, the lowing of cattle, the crowing of cocks, and the cawing of crows floated across the lazy, blue autumnal landscape. The cheery whistle of bob-white came from stubble and fence-row. But old man Madison was blind and deaf. He even failed to detect old Billy's cautiously slackened pace, though it was an old trick; and, finally, when actually within sight of the farm, he turned the horse about and headed for home again. He may have just recalled that the last time he visited

the farm Anna had leaped out and opened the gate for him.

As he drove into the barn at home, from the lane back of his premises, he was surprised to hear Anna's piano. So surprised was he—with Mrs. Madison at the missionary meeting—that he left old Billy standing in the shafts and walked briskly to the house. He entered quietly, though not exactly on his toes, and paused at the sitting-room door.

Lucy Madison, whom he had not heard play a note for over twenty years, sat at the piano. Before her was Anna's favorite book of Nordica waltzes. Slowly, haltingly, with infinite pains, the long-disused fingers, fairly skilful before babies and household work had stiffened their joints, crept from key to key; and the familiar air which used to throb with life and joy under Anna's lusty young hands floated waveringly forth. At the end of a few bars the player paused to wipe her streaming eyes. Then the music limped tremulously on, until the notes again blurred, swam, and danced, and the handkerchief again went up.

Ferdinand did not tarry. With guilty stealth he slipped out through the garden, backed old Billy out of the barn as noiselessly as possible, and a second time started the astonished and indignant equine for the farm. The court-house clock was tolling six as he drove back into town.

No confession was immediately forthcoming from either side. But after they had knelt in prayer on opposite sides of the bed, and composed their heads upon their respective pillows, Mrs. Madison made a clean breast of the afternoon. All their married lives long they had thus balanced accounts with their consciences and each other before they slept, until what was once a penance, and hard, became a lofty pleasure, and easy. After Ferdinand had related his doublings of the afternoon, sparing himself in nothing (although he could dimly see his wife's smiling teeth), he added:

"Now, Lucy, if anybody outside should hear of this, what would they think of us? They'd call us a pair of old ninnies. And next Christmas, when the girls are all home, with their babies, we'll look back and call ourselves the same thing. Pshaw! Did you ever stop to think that



"SHE HAD NOT SLEPT AT ALL"

Annie's only one hundred and seventy-five miles away? We could get her here in six hours, if we wanted her."

"You are right, my dear," she answered, quietly. "Only—it isn't the distance that makes her seem so far away to me. Somebody else has taken our place; and when she's sick or in trouble now, she'll go to *him*."

"I reckon she'd come to her mother yet if she was very sick or in much trouble," he answered, confidently.

"If she didn't, I'd go to her," said the little mother, with more spirit than she had shown for days. "I guess they wouldn't lock me out."

"No, I guess they wouldn't," said Ferdinand, patting her cheek. "I don't remember that we ever locked *your* mother out. If I remember right, you were willing, when a certain important event was about to happen, to have her locked *in*."

"The poor little dear!" she whispered, solemnly.

Ferdinand knew that it was not of her mother that she then thought and spoke, but of that first little visitor in the family, who had tarried for so brief a time. That was thirty-five years before.

Anna had not dismantled her room. Only her most treasured pictures, some bric-à-brac, and a little desk which had been consecrated by her love-letters to Frank were packed in a big box and shipped to her new home. She had laughingly said that she wanted a nest of her own to come back to occasionally; but no one knew better than she the depressing effect which her stripped room would have on her mother after she was gone. As it was, Mrs. Madison had spent hours of melancholy pleasure in wandering about the deserted room, slipping out drawers with something like reverence, or sitting in the low rocking-chair which Anna had clung to from childhood with the tenacity characteristic of her affections, or peeping into the glass which had reflected the darling girl's flushed and happy face so many times as she dressed for some village festivity, or combed and plaited her splendid hair before lying down to sleep.

The day following the missionary meeting was divinely soft and beautiful—a day on which unhappiness would have been a double sin. Mrs. Madison knew

from the kitchen just what a glorious flood of sunlight was pouring through Anna's east windows. So after the breakfast things were put away, and Ferdinand had gone down town, she took her Bible and stole up stairs. A peace such as she had not known for many days seemed to have settled upon her during the night, like a dove. So she now stowed herself into the plain little chair in which Anna had always read, and opened the volume of Sacred Writ.

After a little she arose and took from a shelf in the closet a large pasteboard box full of dolls, from a shapeless rag scullion with inflamed eyes of red yarn to a great waxen-cheeked, flaxen-haired, scarlet-lipped queen with kid hands and feet. The mother knew the history of them all—the uncles and aunts, the birthdays and Christmases, which they memorialized. Their dress-stuffs, too, were almost an epitome of Anna's own wardrobe during her doll days. She cried a little as the spectres of memory went trooping by; but it was not the acrid waters of grief this time which ran down her cheeks. She also kissed the little nigger baby which Anna used to call her "heathren" and send to Sunday-school, with the white babies, to be converted. It seemed to Mrs. Madison that there yet lingered around that battered, much-kissed mouth some vagrant traces of wintergreen candy, quince preserves, and gingerbread rabbits, of all of which the little missionary used to be dreadfully fond.

"It was all very beautiful, and meat and drink for my soul," she murmured, half aloud. "But only because it foreshadowed the real maternity which will now soon be hers, God willing. I would not have her go back—no, not a single hour—were she ever so willing. This room, sanctified to me as it is by remains of her blessed presence, was only a chrysalis, after all, for her to grow safely to maturity in. She is now a woman, my mind tells me, though my heart refuses to believe. She has stretched her wings and flown away—out into life, with its pleasures and pains, its responsibilities and rewards. I can call her back no more than I can call back the ages; but I would not if I could. O God, help me always to think of it thus!"